African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 1
Issue 3 *December 1994*

Article 2

12-1-1994

Searching for West African Cultural Meanings in the Archaeological Record

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Searching for West African Cultural Meanings in the Archaeological Record

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As archaeological data on African Americans has accumulated over the last twenty years, archaeologists have taken two major approaches to analyzing and explaining their information. The first approach seeks archaeological patterns which would allow the recognition of slave sites and serve as signalsor markers when these sites are discovered. The second, centering around the search for objects with physical or behavioral links to West Africa, has moved from the simple transference of objects and ideas from Africa to a more refined focus which integrates behavior with material culture. The aim of the latter is not on direct, unaltered transferences, but onhow West African cultural traditions were modified in the face of the new environments, different social groups, and altered power structures in which slaves found themselves. One facet of these changes was with respect to the material aspects of life. Since the discovery of archaeological artifacts crafted by slaves has been fairly limited and difficult to validate, archaeologists are now realizing the importance of looking at other types of objects. No longer having access to the same commodities once at their disposal, West African slaves and their descendants lived in a material world populated largely with goods of English or European manufacture. It is likely that the enslaved thought about and used some objects differently than their creators had originally intended, adapting these new forms of material culture for use within African American cultural systems. In his study of the relationship between society and material culture, Daniel Miller argues that individuals and social groups can recontextualize and transform the traditional or manufactured images and meanings of objects in ways that construct and reproduce culture. It is to the reinterpretation of these manufactured goods to meet African American uses which archaeologists should look for ways to understand processes of cultural transformations by African Americans.

These meanings become most readily evident when artifacts have been altered in some fashion or recovered archaeologically in atypical contexts, which can then be analyzed to gain insight about their new use. An assemblage of objects interpreted as a conjurer's kit from a standing quarter at Jordan Plantation is an example of artifacts which gained meaning through the use of this approach. Another example are the shaped and sanded fragments of eighteenth-century English earthenwares found at African-American sites in Virginia and Jamaica and believed to have been used in the African game of mancala. Additionally, a pocketknife found at one of the Somerset Plantation slave quarters in North Carolina and pewter spoons recovered from Kingsmill Plantation in Virginia and Garrison Plantation in Maryland exhibited incised markings similar to the West African Bakongo cosmogram. What the shaped pottery, spoons, and knife represent are English manufactured objects modified in ways to make them gain West African-based cultural meanings.

In order to formulate a model for understanding objects recovered from slave sites, the need exists to establish the parameters of an Afrocentric, or more specifically, a "West" Afrocentric, approach. An understanding of the art, religion, social structure, material culture, and archaeological findings of those West African cultures who were most heavily impacted by the

slave trade to North America is crucial to creating this perspective. Despite a growing awareness of the cultural diversity of African and African-American slaves, archaeologists have often tended to treat slaves as single cultural group, basing this consolidation on what they consider to have been common African traits such as religion, subsistence and kinship structure. Even, however, if the slaves arriving in the New World had not originated from various cultures with differing belief systems, situational factors would greatly affect behavior across space and through time and thus archaeological data.

What is needed is a thorough search of the archaeological, ethnographic, and ethnohistorical data of the West African cultures which were present in the American Southeast. This information will allow the creation of a model which reveals cultural and material practices evident within West African archaeological and historical records. The following discussions of spiritual beliefs and musical traditions suggest how an approach informed by West African cultural traditions can be used to reinterpret African-American archaeological data and guide research designs on future excavations.

Spiritual Beliefs - Religion is one of the strongest elements of the African American community and the importance of spirituality in life can be traced back to West African belief systems. While beliefs are difficult to recover archaeologically, humans often use physical manifestations to help express their beliefs. The Jordan Plantation conjurer's kit and a similar find from the basement of the Carroll House in Annapolis, Maryland are two situations where objects were recovered in contexts indicating they had been used in religious ceremonies.

Additional archaeological findings indicative of African American religious beliefs have most likely been misinterpreted either because their context was not as tightly defined, or through lack of a perspective informed by West African traditions. For example, during the destruction or renovation of several standing nineteenth-century slave quarters in Virginia and North Carolina, objects have been discovered inserted between the interior and exterior walls of these buildings. These objects, including a bottle containing a button, several cloth sugar and tobacco bags holding with plant material and an iron knife, are fairly innocuous until they are examined in relation to cultural practices of the Bakongo. Bakongo religious and medicinal practices involve using minkisi, sacred objects which embody the spiritual being and generally consist of some type of container, such as a gourd, pot, bag, or snail shell filled with medicines, such as chalk, nuts, soil, or stones.

The use of minkisi has not been restricted to Africa; Robert Farris Thompson discusses examples in Cuba and New York City. The objects placed intentionally within the walls of slave cabins were probably also associated with African American translations or adaptations of Bakongo or other West African religious and medicinal practices. These two slave cabins do not appear to be isolated examples. Two peeled and sharpened forked sticks discovered between the inner and outer walls of the Stagville Plantation quarter in Durham, North Carolina were interpreted, based on slave narratives, as objects to ward off witches. Similarly, an English delftware drug jar found buried underneath the floor of the eighteenth-century Brush-Everard kitchen in Williamsburg, Virginia and another earthenware vessel from a slave work area at Oxon Hill Manor in Maryland may have also been related to similar practices.

Using late eighteenth-century Virginia store accounts, Ann Smart Martin has found that, among other items, enslaved African Americans were purchasing mirrors. Mirror glass has been found at numerous 18th and 19th-century slave sites in Virginia. While these mirrors may have been used in the traditional sense as looking glasses, research has indicated that mirrors held spiritual significance in West African cultures and those of their descendants. Mirrors are believed to have represented the reflective surface of water, which constituted the world of deceased ancestors, and have been documented as decorating early twentieth-century graves in the African Kongo and in Georgia and South Carolina. Other forms of material culture, such as cowrie shells, beads, and pierced coins, were also likely to have been used in religious practices.

Music - As indicated here, the presence of West African based religious traditions is strongly suggested in the material culture of slave sites. The same appears true in music as well. Music traditions from West Africa have been documented in African American culture through nineteenth-century paintings, photographs, and traveler's descriptions. Given the importance of music in African and African-American life, and its documentation in these other sources, musical evidence should be evident archaeologically. Excavations to date, however, have recovered only limited evidence of musical instruments, primarily mouth harps. Other types of artifacts, however, could also have been used in making music. For example, two commonly recovered items are iron keys and jawbones from large mammals, such as horses, pigs, and cows. These generally have been interpreted as functioning in their typical uses as security devices and as food. An alternate explanation for these objects would be a musical one. The practice of scraping an iron rod or key over the jawbone of a large animal occurs within African, as well as African-American music traditions. This hypothesis could be easily tested by examining the jawbones for wear patterns caused by the scraping of the keys. Additionally, playing metal washboards by placing thimbles over the fingers, popular in African American blues, was derived from the practice of playing the jawbone and spoon playing originated from the African tradition of playing the bones.

The presence of buttons in larger percentages on slave sites than on those of other ethnic origins, has been interpreted as a byproduct of using old clothing in quiltmaking. An alternative explanation is that in some instances buttons may have been used in a fashion similar to that of cowrie shells strung around gourds as a percussion instrument called a shekere. Since the recovery of gourds from a typical archaeological context would be rare, testing this hypothesis would involve soil sampling from archaeological contexts containing large quantities of buttons to test for traces of pollen or carbonized seeds.

Conclusion - These discussions provide a few suggestions for ways African American archaeology can be viewed from a West Afrocentric perspective and how it affects the way artifacts and other findings can be viewed. This work is at a very preliminary stage and the next task is to systematically test these and similar hypotheses on excavated site data. As suggested by these examples, enslaved Africans and African Americans retained and modified West African spiritual traditions in ways that canbe documented archaeologically. In doing so, they appear to have used European manufactured and natural objects in way which had relevance to West African spiritual traditions.